



Fall of Aleppo: Challenges Persist

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After years of rebel control in the ongoing Syrian civil war, the city of Aleppo fell under the full control of the Syrian army and pro-Government allied forces on December 13, 2016, thus marking a turning point in this protracted civil war. In this backdrop of President Bashar al-Assad's military victory, it is crucial to look into the future of this war and its regional and global security implications. Before an analysis of the security dynamics emerging out of Aleppo, it is imperative to historically understand the battle for Aleppo that began with the anti-Government uprising in April 2011. For this, following questions need to be addressed; *how did Aleppo become a problem? Who first took over the city and what is the nature and future of President Assad's victory?*

Aleppo: War Timeline

From the initial period of the student uprising against the Government in Aleppo in April-May 2011 until the fall in December 2016, the city has witnessed successive military offensives and sieges. These protests by the city's university students were contained by the Government Security Forces (SFs) as well as pro-Government loyalist students in the city. It was from here that Aleppo, Syria's economic capital, was dragged into the war, leading to fierce fighting in July 2012 between the army and the rebels who were part of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a conglomerate of armed civilian and army defectors,. It is important to note that the rebels include both the FSA and the non-FSA extremist groups that are more inclined towards Islamists. With the Islamists coming in, the anti-Government movement took religious, extremist and violent form. These rebels have since the beginning of the war posed serious ideological and security challenges to the Government.

The rebels collectively had been waging a counter-offensive against pro-government forces in Aleppo that had been the largest battlefield in the Syrian war, thus far. Prolonged offensives in and around the city continued in August 2012, resulting in the division of the city

between the rebel-controlled East Aleppo and the Government-controlled West Aleppo. The Western part of the city inhabits fairly affluent and influential Syrians with considerable pro-Government sympathisers. The offensive between the two sides entered in its second year with the Government forces launching airstrikes in the rebel-held areas on December 15, 2013. With Russia entering the war in support of the Government in the year 2015, Aleppo offensive grew in scale. In an attempt to reclaim the territory from the armed rebels, the Government in July-August 2016 advanced its operations by cutting the rebel's last supply route and effectively placing Eastern Aleppo under siege. Despite various efforts by the rebels to break through the siege, the Government succeeded in obstructing the access to supply route. Gradually, after a period of two months, the Government forces with the Russian air support re-launched air offensive on November 15, 2016. This resulted in the recapture of Districts from rebel control. On November 26, 2016, the Government announced the recapturing of the largest rebel zone that included the District of Masaken Hanano. Subsequently, with sustained war efforts, the Government forces recaptured more than 90 per cent of the territory from the control of the rebels, who were involved in shelling in civilian areas. Eventually, on December 13, 2016, the Government stood victorious in the battle for Aleppo with the entire territory falling out of the control of the armed rebels.

However, this victory by the Government is not without further regional and global challenges. While looking into the challenges post-Fall, it is important to see this victory from two main perspectives – **strategic and political**. Strategically, the victory in Aleppo will shape the future of the conflict that is far from over. The defeat of the rebels will certainly transform the course of war and open up channels of political negotiations. Politically, the fall of Aleppo will strengthen President Assad's legitimacy and the Government will consolidate its power and initiate negotiations from a position of strength. At the ideological level the victory against the collective anti-Assad forces is still to be won. It is the ideological challenge that poses threat to the security of the country and the region at large.

Challenges Within and Without

Despite the victory for the Government, the larger challenges remain to be addressed. The Fall of Aleppo is just a phase in the ongoing conflict in Syria and should be seen in terms of territorial gains and military victory. The main challenge pertains to the ideological underpinnings of this war that can have a negative impact on the political process. Conspicuously, a week after the fall of Aleppo and the subsequent ongoing evacuation of the civilians, the Russian Ambassador to Turkey Andrei Karlov was shot dead on December 19, 2016, in Ankara in a targeted attack by an off-duty Turkish Police Officer, who while pulling the trigger, shouted, "Don't forget Aleppo." Going by the killer's frantic call to "...wage jihad", this attack can be primarily seen as a backlash against Russia's military involvement in Syria with an intention to sabotage the rapprochement between Moscow and Ankara and also complicate the attempts towards resolution in Syria.

However, the assassination is unlikely to adversely impact Russia-Turkey relations as well as to derail the movement towards political negotiations. In fact, this attack on Russian Ambassador is set to bring both Turkey and Russia together in their “fight against terrorism”.

As seen in Turkey, the common threat of terrorism becomes complex with the surfacing of lone wolves from within the system and also with the emergence of other factions from an already fractured rebel group in the country. In the aftermath of the Government control of Aleppo the challenge becomes complex with the rebels escaping these areas. The challenge exacerbates with the threat of rebels and terrorist groups regrouping, re-launching and recapturing the liberated territories. As seen in the past, on May 20, 2015, the ancient city of Palmyra had entirely fallen to IS control after the collapse of the seven day siege. Later, nearly a year after the fall, the Syrian army after inflicting many losses on the terrorist group recaptured the citadel of Palmyra on March 25, 2016. This did not last too long and in a gap of eight months the militants recaptured and took full control of the city again on December 11, 2016. The case of Palmyra can serve as an example to the rebels and terrorists fleeing Aleppo in the aftermath of the fall and may result in the recapturing of a part of the territory, thus posing a challenge to the credibility of the Government-led counter-terror operations.

In such a scenario where there is a mosaic of rebel groups and terrorist outfits with varied ideological motivations, the only respite comes with hope for a productive political reconciliation and further redeployment of troops to other fronts of the war.

Conclusion

The fall of Aleppo, a city that has been described as the “microcosm of the entire civil war”, has put the Government of President Assad in a stronger position to initiate negotiations. For the rebels, the fall is demoralising, both psychologically and militarily. Political negotiations are going to determine what happens in Syria. Incidentally, on December 20, 2016, leaders from Russia, Turkey and Iran met to broker a peace deal in Syria, emphasising a new shift in regional influence. Referred as the “Moscow Declaration”, the tripartite meet led to the emergence of the declaration of principles stating that the three countries should be responsible to govern any agreement emerging from the talks. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Turkish Foreign Minister Mehmet Cavusoglu and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif agreed in the joint statement to “express their willingness to help the Syrian government and the opposition draft a (peace) agreement and act as its guarantors.”

Adding to this, Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that the tripartite coalition’s plan for a Syria-wide ceasefire that excluded the Islamic State and the Syrian Chapter of al-Qaeda had better prospects of succeeding than previous negotiations.

In another such development, the United Nations (UN) on December 31, 2016, adopted a resolution supporting the efforts made by Russia and Turkey to end violence in Syria and start peace negotiations. On December 28, 2016, the Syrian Government and the armed opposition had

agreed to a nationwide ceasefire. The Moscow-Ankara brokered truce could lead to positive outcomes, paving the way for a long-term political agreement. The peace talks between President Assad's Government and rebel forces are set to take place in late January 2017 in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan.

Importantly, the fall and the successive developments have also been a blowback to external powers, primarily United States and its allies that were funding and militarily assisting the rebels against the Government of Syria. It challenges Washington's strategy of externally implanting a leader who would safeguard America's interest in Syria. Democracy has to come from within the people. It can neither be externally invoked nor stoked. The Moscow Declaration has altered the power dynamics in West Asia with Iran building resistance against the US and its allies, and Russia trying to restore its influence in the region. With the fall of Aleppo and the culmination of Moscow Declaration that aims to draw a roadmap to end the Syrian crisis it needs to be seen whether Syria will reinvent a new regional order.

At the level of domestic politics, unless President Bashar al-Assad's Government pursues credible political reforms the military success in Aleppo is far from translating into political stability and peace. Equally importantly, the larger battle in Syria is yet to get over with serious security challenges emanating out of the multiplicity of outfits that owe allegiance to one or the other terrorist grouping. It is important to see what comes after Aleppo. *Where will the rebels, both moderate and extremist with Islamist sympathies, eventually turn to? Will the terms of political negotiations be all inclusive and who among them will deflect to the hardliners? Will they advance to al Qaeda dominated Idlib Province or IS-controlled Palmyra?* Worryingly, the situation on the ground may get more complex with rebels escaping the areas of operation and switching insurgent groups. In the backdrop of the security challenges within, what needs to be seen is the prospect of political negotiations and its larger impact both within and without.

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